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ABSTRACT

Ethnographers in composition must consider their work as a set of discursive practices which are materially affected by the institutional and disciplinary practices of the ethnographer. The value of such ethnographic research for a writing program is that it provides a useful critique of disciplinary practices in English, rather than a critique of the "foreign" practices of other disciplines. In an examination of her own writings for an economics class, a researcher concluded that student papers tended to correspond to ideas and forms of expression present in instructor lectures and the class textbook. By contrast, the study of English is preoccupied with individual achievements of writers. In composition classes, student writers are discouraged from using cliches or from imitating other authors. The question of whether the celebration of individual achievement in writing tends to isolate students, particularly in marginalized groups, is worthy of analysis. Also worth examining is whether institutional entities place obstacles in the way of students' learning processes. (SG)

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Researching Language Practices in Other Disciplines: Seeing Ourselves as Other

At the Conference on College Composition and Communication two years ago, I had the good fortune to hear a panel on ethnographic research in writing. This came the day after I had presented my own ethnography on language practices and the construction of disciplinary knowledge in an economics classroom, the same classroom I am going to discuss today. One problem described by the panelists in doing ethnography was how to tell the "truth" and not get fired, sued, or otherwise harassed. "Telling the truth" included an evaluation of the writing practices of their institutional subjects. For various reasons, the researchers felt they weren't being "honest" with their subjects or true to their professional standards if they didn't provide such a critique.

During this panel, I recalled a comment that an audience

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member had made regarding my report the day before. He told me he had enjoyed my vivid characterization of the economics professor as "storyteller." However, he didn't understand what point, if any, I was making about the professor's teaching. My description, entertaining as it was, clearly demonstrated to him that this classroom was very much in the transmission mode argued against by Freire and Fulwiler, though I had argued this model did not adequately describe the "active" listening that I and my student colleagues had engaged in. Was I saying, my questioner inquired, that this professor's methods were praiseworthy? That lecture-based writing intensive classrooms were desirable?

I'm afraid the answer I gave him satisfied neither of us, which is perhaps why the question was quite fresh in my mind the next day as I listened to the ethnographic researchers describe their sometimes harrowing experiences in "telling the truth." It occurred to me that the speakers intended their ethnographic research to effect some kind of change within the institutions they had studied. "Telling the truth," however, was no easy task when, as researcher, one becomes both observer and participant in the lives of one's subjects. We, the writing specialists, considered ourselves the "authorities." Therefore we felt compromised in withholding our professional assessment from our subjects, and thus "dishonest." Yet our loyalties to the subjects, including the students and employees of our respective institutions, also made us hesitate in voicing our judgments.

There is good reason to hesitate. According to Carl G.

Herndl's recent article in College English, "Writing Ethnography: Representation, Rhetoric, and Institutional Practice," ethnographers in composition must consider their work not as some objective artifact verified by field methods such as triangulation but as a set of discursive practices which are materially affected by the institutional and disciplinary practices of the ethnographer. What an ethnographer writes is not simply the "facts" of a field experience but "the narrative structures, textual tropes, and argumentative topoi developed by the ethnographic genre" (321). Herndl concludes that ethnography is "a highly stylized form of verisimilitude that has become a standard in discussions of ethnographic method and functions as a textual strategy authorizing attempts at ethnographic realism" (321). Ethnographers can no longer assert that what they represent in their ethnographies is based upon non-discursive "reality" but rather text shaped by the informing texts of the ethnographer. Ethnographers are necessarily implicated by their own discursive practices; any attempt to claim authority over the practices of others is, as you will see, an attempt to deny that implication.

Thus, what I have since come to realize about the value of this kind of ethnographic research for a writing program is that it provides a useful critique of our own disciplinary practices in English, rather than a critique of the "foreign" practices of other disciplines. Just as we read the stories of different cultures, we can "read" the texts of other classrooms in order to step outside of our own and view it in the strangely familiar

light such an imagined perspective affords. Stories reflect the way other people see themselves, and by reading our stories through the stories of others, we can more clearly perceive the stories we live by. Knowing the practices of other disciplines can reveal to us what is not present, what is implied, or what is even disturbingly present in our English practices. Thus, such studies provide an opportunity to formulate questions about English practices that we may not have previously thought to ask, questions of why we value what we do in the ways we do. In ventures such as Writing Across the Curriculum, it is doubly important that we look at the values we seek to import to the classrooms of other disciplines and to decenter the authority we are so tempted to claim as writing "experts."

Did I, at the time I conducted my research, believe that the language practices of my economics instructor were "right" or "good" or otherwise "appropriate"? My colleague, Lil Brannon, put this question to me one day while discussing the economics students' writing. It was a terribly difficult question to address. As a participant/observer, I could not pretend to any kind of "objective" viewpoint, if objective meant neutral or otherwise disinterested. I had enjoyed the professor's "storytelling," the political commentary and anecdotes from many years of work with the government. His lectures often dealt with concrete budget problems of the day and their possible solutions, which made economics "real" to me. My writing consultant self, however, wanted this teacher to know my "true" feelings about his writing instruction, which was that it was fundamentally wrong-headed.

"You've got to believe in what [your subject] is doing," the Lil insisted. "Think how it would have been if Shirley Brice Heath had gone into Roadville and Trackton (the two communities she had studied in Ways With Words) and told them their language practices were all wrong."

In hindsight, I realize it was still easier for me to grant this instructor the authority of his lectures because he was, after all, the expert in economics. What was more difficult was granting him authority regarding student writing. Writing, after all, was my area of expertise. Though I was willing to believe that the lectures were enabling to student listeners, I could not get past the belief that student papers were nothing more than a reshuffling of the language, data, and structures of the assigned text. Students weren't writing original ideas or original prose. What was worse, they didn't try to.

I returned to the papers I had written for the economics class and compared them to the other students' papers. I recalled that when I wrote my papers, I had tried to ground the ideas of the lecture and the text in my own experience in the world outside class. I sought to say something different than simply repeating what the teacher and the text said. After all, the assignment said to argue for a position; I assumed that meant the instructor wanted to know what I thought, even though, as a novice economist, I wasn't even sure I knew what I thought.

To assist my analysis, I decided to draft a paper describing the differences between the papers I had written for the class, which had been modeled on the political narrative style of the

lectures, and those of the other students, which had been, for the most part, closely modeled on the assigned text. I pointed out phrases, syntax, and data in the student papers which closely corresponded with textbook passages. Then I showed this paper to the professor. Was the difference I perceived one that he agreed with? He did. Did he know students wrote so closely to the text. He did. Did he want them to? Yes. Did it surprise him that students "argued," for the most part, the same position promoted by the textbook author and him? No. Did he expect them to have original ideas? No.

In trying to make sense of what constituted a major disjuncture between my and the professor's concept of originality, I recalled Shirley Brice Heath's description of the Roadville and Trackton people, how the Trackton parents did not talk to their babies until they were at least a year old, how Roadville parents punished their children for their flights of fancy when describing social interactions. Heath could have easily said to her subjects, "Now if you Trackton parents want your children to do well in the middle class school, you've got to start talking to them as soon as they're born. You Roadville parents have got to let your child use expressive language before they can learn transactional and poetic language. Right now, you are doing it all wrong."

I recognized a powerful inclination in myself to regard this instructor's practice as "other" than my own. Cautiously, I turned my judgment of these "foreign" practices into a question to ask the instructor, "Why do the students write so close to the text?"

The instructor was only too willing to explain the conventions of economic discourse: economists routinely borrowed from each other because the pool of received knowledge was, in fact, so small. They traded off phrases, terminology, and statistics often without any citation. It was like sitting in on a small conversation where everyone knew everyone else. There were a limited number of principles, arguments, and data to go around. Economics students were eavesdroppers on this larger discussion. They had nothing new to add to the conversation because they did not possess vital skills such as statistical analysis. Instead, they needed to practice the language so they could be understood by other economists.

The instructor was confident that the students understood the principles in question and could make sound arguments. What concerned him was the expression of those principles. Rather than regard passages written close to the text as "cheating," the instructor regarded such writing as a positive indication that students were "trying out" the disciplinary discourse as modeled by the textbook.

But, you may ask, is this view of language practices <u>right</u>? I refer you again to Shirley Brice Heath. Was it right that Trackton parents did not talk to their infants? That Roadville parents discouraged their children's fantasies? In an ethnographic study, I now think that the question is not to ask whether a culture's practices are right; the question to ask is what do they <u>mean</u>?

What did it mean that students "borrowed" not only data and

language from the textbook, but ideas as well? Anthropologist Clifford Geertz has frequently demonstrated the use of analogy as an invaluable strategy when mediating meaning between two cultures. Here is an analogy based on a story I heard about a former colleague, Steve North, who had recently returned from China. Just as my sense of ownership differed from the economics instructor, Steve discovered a similar difference between his sense of personal property and space which contrasted greatly with those of his Chinese hosts. For instance, over the course of his year's visit, Steve found it increasingly difficult to take his daily run in the city because of the stares of so many people. Even though he recognized the stares as being generally friendly, he could not help feeling unnerved. His children were also upset one day when, surrounded by curious Chinese onlookers, their backpacks were rummaged and the contents passed around. Again, though the motives of the people were assumed to be friendly, the experience felt like a violation to the American children.

Compare the sense of ownership of language in economics to the ownership of property in China. When students attempt to locate themselves within this unfamiliar discourse, they reach with curiosity for written models for their writing, let the words of the text tumble through their minds and sift back onto the page. They are hungry for the textures, contours, sounds, rhythms, and resonances of the new language. To regard it as other than a communal resource would seem stingy, greedy, and unfair. Everyone listening in knows what sources you're referring to; in the trying out, the "shaping at the point of utterance" as

James Britton says, comes a sense of participation.

Thus, we might say that disciplinary practices, like cultural practices, shape the values that each holds in regard to what constitutes good writing. The "culture" of English observes different language practices than the "culture" of economics. Similarly, the sciences, as a culture, also value different practices than the humanities. Given that economists identify more with the empirical measurements of the sciences than with the interpretations of the humanities, they place themselves as scientists; and, as scientists, they view their work as a collective effort to solve the puzzles of the economics paradigm. As Thomas Kuhn writes in The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, scientists are like "worker bees" filling in the existing paradigm. What doesn't fit the paradigm is seen not as a breakthrough but as an anomaly. Being a relatively small group, economists readily pool their information, exchange it, debate it, in hopes of contributing one more piece to solving the puzzle of economic problems. What they come to know, they come by collectively. Lewis Thomas, in The Lives of a Cell, compares scientists to a favorite biological entity of his, ants, who, individually, scurry around without purpose, but collectively, almost telepathically, can create enormous structures thousands of times larger and more complex than any one ant. So it is with science--the collective knowledge towards the solution of problems.

Compare the collective, anti-individualistic model of the scientist with that of English. Literary studies appear to be

preoccupied with individual achievements of writers, geniuses who struggled against unreceptive audiences whose works are vindicated often only upon death. The emphasis in discursive practices is on originality, style, uniqueness--the autonomous individual against a society that advocates conformity. The Self is elevated to a level of incredible autonomy in a world teeming with the fragile interdependencies illuminated by biology. Student writers had better not use cliches or imitate another author (unless it's an exercise in style) or use someone else's ideas without proper documentation.

This study raises some difficult questions about our own practices in English and in particular, in writing instruction. First, are we celebrating individual achievement at the expense of isolating students, creating a sense of writing as an act of autonomy, something that must be done alone in order to be done at all? In a recent issue of College Composition and Communication, Lester Faigley questions the values emphasized in a recent collection of student writing selected by leaders in the field of composition and rhetoric. Almost all of the essays are personal or autobiographical rather than professional or disciplinary writing. Faigley notes that the instructors, in their accompanying essays, almost uniformly praise students' authenticity of voice, honesty, individuality, and personal expression.

Another question: Does the celebration of individual autonomy become exclusionary to students, especially those of marginalized groups? In our insistence that students value what we may regard as the self-evident values of "authenticity of

voice," "honesty," and so forth, I think we may actually be an obstacle in their paths to development because we do not help our students understand the "cultural" baggage surrounding concepts that we value the most.

If we want writing to mean something, the institution must change. Insofar as we, too, are the institution, we must examine the ways in which our own values uphold rather than deconstruct institutional hierarchies that make difference an anomaly to eradicate rather than an opportunity for learning. By understanding the differences between our "culture" of English and the "cultures" of other disciplines, we can begin to also understand the assumptions within our practices, so that concepts such as "originality" become problematic instead of remaining comfortably "universal." The better we become at recognizing the obstacles we, as institutional entities, place before our students, the more readily we can get out of the way of of students' learning processes.

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